DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 194 911 CS 205 997

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TITLE "They Won't Let Me!": Administrative Constraints in Teaching English.
PUB DATE Aug 80
NOTE 11p.: Paper presented at the Annual International Conference on the Teaching of English (3rd, Sydney, Australia, August 17-22, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role: Administrators: Educational Administration: *English Instruction: Faculty: Foreign Countries: High Schools: *Job Performance: *Problems: *Success: *Teacher Attitudes: Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Australia (Queensland)

ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that teachers usually blame the education system and the administration for discrepancies between how and what they want to teach, and how and what they actually do teach, a study was conducted to determine if teachers really are constrained by their administrators. Ninety-three teachers of tenth-year English from 22 Queensland, Australia, high schools were asked to rank the influence of six groups in the areas of content, materials, methods, and assessment. The groups were the Board of Secondary School Studies, moderators, administrators, subject masters, groups of teachers, and individual teachers. The board, its moderators, and administrators were invariably seen as the least important determinants. The subject masters and groups of teachers were given consistently high rankings. To corroborate the major finding, 15 representative teachers were drawn from nine of the high schools. When their ideas about teaching written composition were studied, gaps most prevalent in the classroom were found between intention and action. Both lack of support by administration or parents for programs and inadequate teacher training were suggested as explanations for the discrepancies, rather than actual administrative constraints. (HTH)

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"THEY WON'T LET ME!": ADMINISTRATIVE CONSTRAINTS IN TEACHING ENGLISH

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Presented at the
Third International Conference on the Teaching of English,
Sydney, Australia,
August 17-22, 1980.

CS205997

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching can be depicted as a process which almost inevitably involves paradox and dilemma since most of the research strongly confirms the existence of inconsistencies between what teachers say they want to do and what they actually do. For example, Collis (1967) Charters and Jones (1973) and Hamilton (1973) report that teachers revert to an almost common method of presentation in the classroom, despite initial differences in intentions. Similarly, after 250 classrooms in more than 100 American schools had been visited, Goodlad (1968:2) concluded that it is quite erroneous to assume substantial implementation of teachers' own ideas and preferred practices. As teachers go busily about their daily chores, the disparity is enormous. Gallo (1968), Barker-Lunn (1970) and Barnes (1976, personal communication) have found or expect almost no link between these different levels of reality. Sharp and Green (1975), Gracey (1972), Mehan (1974), Talbert (1976) and Berlak and Berlak (1976) agree that there are inconsistencies between the ideal and the real.

Teachers themselves agree that this kind of second best accords with their experience and that too little of what they want ever seems to eventuate. Teaching testifies to the wisdom of Robbie Burns' well known adage that:

the best laid schemes o' mice and men
Gan aft agley;
and leave us naught but grief and pain
For promised joy.

In teaching, the usual explanation is that "they won't let me!" where the interfering "they" takes the form of the education system and its officers and the local school administration. This may be a handy excuse and one that even offers advantages. Instead of blaming themselves for the discrepancy and the frustration, teachers can see themselves as thwarted persons capable of great things if only they were allowed to do so. The problem to be solved is whether or not there really is an obstructionist "they". Are teachers really kept in chains by their administrators?

MEASURING DECISIONS AFFECTING THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

Ninety-three teachers of year ten English, from twenty-two large, State high schools in south-east Queensland, volunteered to complete a ranking instrument designed to index the perceptions that they had of the determinants of the major components of the year ten English curriculum; that is, of content, materials, methods and assessment. The teachers were asked to indicate how they saw, at their own school, the relative influence of six groups in these four areas. The groups were the Board of Secondary School Studies, moderators, school administrators, (principal and deputy principal), subject master, groups of teachers and individual classroom teachers. The six groups had previously been identified as important by Campbell et al. (1976). The teachers ranked the groups in order of importance from least to most (one or six) in each of the four areas. The rankings from the teachers were summed and averaged in order to reveal, at least in a preliminary way, which of the groups were perceived as most influential in affecting curriculum decisions in English teaching.

RESULTS

When the ninety-three teachers ranked the Board of Secondary School Studies (BS), moderators (M), principal and deputy principal (P), subject master (SM), groups of teachers (G) and individual teachers (T) in order of importance from the least to the greatest influence in each of four areas (content, materials, teaching methods and evaluation), the following means and standard deviations were obtained (see Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

While the subject master emerged as the single most important influence in three of the areas, the Board, its moderators and high school principals were invariably seen as the least important determinants. McBryde and Lamont (1979:8) also have found that, even though principals have the power to veto decisions relating to assessment procedures, they seldom exercise it. In the present study, the teachers in the schools perceived that they themselves had a great deal of say in decisions about the English curriculum. In the area of teaching methods, the individual teacher's autonomy was particularly marked. Although many other decisions were attributed to the subject master, and in particular in relation to assessment, these were reported as being made in consultation with other teachers of the subject. Accordingly, groups of teachers were given consistently high rankings.

The Campbell study (1976) has previously depicted teams of teachers as generally enjoying a growing independence in curricular matters. This may be particularly so in English where the syllabus is content-free, in no way prescriptive and containing only recommendations. One inspector, the first chief moderator in English (retired), had

jokingly referred to its draft form as "the yellow peril." There was some feeling that many teachers were not ready for the freedom that it offered them. Some teachers still remain unsure even of their own degree of autonomy in regard to method, particularly if they have only recently "taken up the reins again" as, for example, after a period of child-rearing.

In order to corroborate the major finding, a rational and empirically derived sample of fifteen demonstrably representative teachers were drawn from nine of the high schools. When their ideas about teaching written composition were studied in process of being implemented across a number of different levels of reality, gaps were found to open up between intention and action. This discrepancy was most prevalent in the classroom. However, of the thirty-three examples of inconsistency that were observed, less than six per cent occurred at the actual point of senior administrative influence (see Diamond, 1980).

One subject master found that time, planning and reading all the work that his students completed were his biggest problems. The other two subject masters in the sample also had to cope with internal difficulties. While the latter said that teachers had to struggle in temporary classrooms in order "to get an atmosphere conducive to a mood of writing," the former found that lack of a suitable home-room unsettled his composite class which he had assembled, in order to draw "troublemakers" out of other teachers' classes.

DISCUSSION

As a whole, the teachers reported that they were able to select whatever teaching strategies were calculated by them as able to implement their ideas about teaching writing. However, while senior administrative superiors were not apparently important obstructions to teacher activity in the classroom itself, their effects still proved to be quite complex. Although the teachers were not unduly constrained in relation to classroom practices, a clear distinction was revealed between administrative and instructional areas. The authority of the subject master was manifest in the former zone, but it was more muted in the latter. One teacher reports:

> There's no hindrance or interruptions at administrative levels, really. Anything that the English Department want to do they can. While there's no positive help, there's no obstruction except from the community .... I think my biggest problem as a teacher is the lack of communication between this school and the majority of parents.

Another teacher agrees with this:

> I get very little flak except very occasionally from some parents who think we don't cover enough work because we "just" talk. Otherwise, I'm almost totally free to do what I want.

A great deal of opposition may not exist to prevent teachers using methods they deem appropriate to their own aims and ideas. However, school systems may not provide special support for teachers' programs. One teacher stressed that it is the size of classes that is one of the main obstacles to be overcome:

> It's hard because we can't get around to each kid as an individual. If I could just sit down with each one of them with their last piece of writing and say, "This is what you've done. This is how you could have done better." That's the only way.

In the present study, obstruction could so rarely be directly attributed to senior school administrators that teachers may not reasonably blame "them" for the chains they wear. The barriers to the application of teachers' ideas loomed largest in their own classrooms. If the school system can no longer be portrayed as the chief culprit in constraining teachers of English, perhaps programs of teacher education and their lack of effect in fundamentally altering teachers' methods or their core and central beliefs may be looked at as a possible and prior source of the general frustration; that is, together with the constraints of subject masters, class size and class time, as constituting the real "they." Perhaps the teachers' ideas or intentions were never well formed at all. A teacher in the study explains something of the origins of the "grief and pain."

> Trainee teachers often don't understand their college "gear." Especially in your first years out, you reproduce the teaching you experienced. You always end up with conflict and you're left asking if you're doing the right thing. Do you really believe in your own convictions?

CONCLUSION

Between teachers' initial ideas and their eventual classroom implementation, impediments of various kinds operated as "knockout" factors. While additional research is needed both to demonstrate a tighter relationship between the various levels of the reality of teaching English and to capture the effects on pupils of their teachers' intentions being thwarted in the classroom, "They won't let me!" is one myth that seems to have been put to rest, at least in the teaching of English.

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TABLE 1: RATING OF CURRICULUM INFLUENCE, 22 HIGH SCHOOLS.

		$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Rank
1.	Content			
	Board of Secondary School Studies	3.36	1.88	4
	Moderators	2.28	1.14	5
	Principal	2.19	1.31	6
	Subject Master	5.36	.83	1
	Groups of Teachers	4.02	1.15	2
	Teacher	3.82	1.36	3
2.	Materials			
	Board of Secondary School Studies	2.48	1.57	5
	Moderators	2.11	1.03	6
	Principal	2.57	1.35	4
	Subject Master	5.33	.94	1
	Groups of Teachers	4.41	1.13	2
	Teacher	4.10	1.31	3
3.	Teaching Methods			
	Board of Secondary School Studies	1.86	1.07	6
	Moderators	2.09	.88	5
	Principal	2.58	1.17	4
	Subject Master	4.59	.83	2
	Groups of Teachers	4.45	.93	3
	Teacher	5.42	1.17	1
4.	Evaluation			
	Board of Secondary School Studies	2.51	1.58	6
	Moderators	2.82	1.28	4
	Principal	2.56	1.48	5
	Subject Master	5.36	.92	1
	Groups of Teachers	3.89	1.51	2
	Teacher	3.89	1.39	2